Using authentic spoken texts in socio- pragmatic focused instruction: A survey of teacher practices and perspectives.

Heather Denny, AUT University and Helen Basturkmen, University of Auckland

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Rationale for the Project

Lack of knowledge of socio pragmatic aspects of communication (social and cultural norms associated with interaction) can constitute a barrier to successful communication in a second language (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005). Research shows that socio pragmatic norms are not acquired through simple immersion, and that some form of explicit instruction is helpful (Kasper & Roever, 2004).

Various strategies for direct instruction of adult learners in workplace and academic settings have involved the use of authentic texts of spoken interaction and the analysis of its transcripts in teaching. (Malthus, Holmes, & Major, 2005; Riddiford & Joe, 2005). However, there are few collections of suitable New Zealand based authentic texts to teach classes with a community focus, and there is a need to collect authentic recordings in these areas, and others where there are identified gaps, that can be developed into teaching materials.

In addition, from conversations with teachers in the field, there are indications that, for teachers with little exposure to using authentic materials, there can be a number of practical and psychological barriers to trialling this approach with their classes. As we have found it to be effective in our own teaching (Basturkmen, 2002; Denny, 2008a, 2008b) our aim was to more precisely identify these barriers and help teachers to overcome them, and to trial this approach in a wide range of courses.

Project description

Data collection tools in this project consisted of a survey of 18 teachers of English in a multi-level tertiary institution in Auckland and follow up interviews with eight of these teachers in order to

- gauge perceived need for the teaching of the socio-cultural norms of spoken NZ English in their classes
- determine to what extent these norms are already being taught
- raise the awareness, among teachers, of the need to include socio cultural norms in their courses and of the possibility of using authentic spoken texts to facilitate this teaching
- identify barriers to the teaching of socio cultural norms using authentic spoken texts and determine what support teachers need to try this approach
- collect teachers' ideas about suitable methodology for the teaching of socio-cultural norms in a variety of different kinds of courses.
- produce a report on existing teacher practises in the teaching of socio-cultural norms and attitudes towards using authentic spoken texts to facilitate this
- identify four suitable teachers to take part in a mentored materials creation and evaluation project (see below).

Methodology

Surveys were sent out to 32 teachers and 18 teachers responded. Of the non respondents, eight were not able to respond because they did not teach spoken English. The response rate of those teaching spoken English in one or more programme was 18 out of 24. Three respondents were teaching at degree or diploma level, five in academic focussed programmes at pre degree level, eight in general focussed EAL courses, and seven in employment focussed courses at a lower level.

 The research questions were:

- Which ESOL teachers already use authentic texts in teaching spoken English?

- Which teachers would like to?

- What difficulties do teachers see in teaching and developing materials based on the use of authentic texts?

- Which classes would benefit from instruction with this focus?

- What kinds of texts need to be collected?

- What activities can teachers suggest for use with authentic spoken texts?

- Which teachers and classes would like to participate in [later stages of] this project?

- What level of involvement would the teachers like with the research and development aspect of this project?

The data from the survey was collated and analysed by use of descriptive statistics and identification of themes emerging in the open response type items. Classes that could benefit from the use of authentic texts for the teaching of pragmatics were identified and eight teachers of the 18 respondents to the questionnaire who were teaching these classes were selected for interview.

The criteria for selecting the interviewees also included an interest in exploring the concepts further, as well as an interest and likely ability to take part in the later stages of the project (materials developments and evaluation). Important factors were research and materials development experience and adequate time spent on campus. An added consideration in selection was to ensure that those interviewed were teaching in a variety of programmes and at a variety of learner proficiency levels. Two of those interviewed were teaching in a degree programme, two in an academic focussed programme at certificate level, three were involved in general focussed EAL courses and four in employment focussed courses at a lower level.

The aim of the interviews was to explore in more depth themes identified in their responses to the survey. These included the reasons or need for using authentic spoken texts in the classroom to raise awareness of socio-cultural norms, perceived barriers to using authentic texts, suitable teaching activities for helping their learners to acquire pragmatic norms, and their interest in and motivation for trying an approach involving the use of authentic texts as models.

The data from the interviews was transcribed and summarised by research question and themes identified. Of the eight interviewed, four suitable teachers were identified from the above process and invited to participate in the next stage of the project (text collection and development of instructional materials).

Findings

Data reported here is a blend of data from the survey (N=18) and the interviews (N= 8 interviewees), with quotations from the interview data. Findings are reported under research question.

1. Which teachers already use authentic texts in teaching spoken English?

It is perhaps helpful to explain degree of authenticity of teaching materials in this context. In the survey a variety of types of authentic sample spoken texts for teaching pragmatics is mentioned. These vary in degree of authenticity which, in general, depends on the extent to which the exchange in the spoken text is naturally occurring and whether it is scripted or not. There is a continuum from fully authentic spoken texts (ie recorded naturally occurring unscripted spoken English exchanges which take place outside the classroom and are not primarily for teaching English) to non authentic spoken texts which are scripted and written primarily with English language teaching in mind, often with a grammar or topic focus. After fully authentic spoken texts the next most authentic are semi-authentic unscripted texts. These are made by recording an unscripted role-play between expert or native speakers and contain many of the features of fully authentic exchanges. Next in the continuum is semi-authentic scripted. Here the exchange is modelled on fully authentic exchanges and contains many of the features of these, but is scripted. The non authentic text has very few of the features of authentic exchanges and is also scripted.

Only three teachers from the survey reported using fully authentic samples (which were recorded live in a lecture or from the radio), and only four reported using semi-authentic unscripted samples (these being either teacher made or from one New Zealand textbook). Teachers using these two most authentic types of samples were teaching classes at higher learner proficiency levels. Those who reported using non authentic samples (all from textbooks) were teaching classes at a lower proficiency level (8 respondents). The majority reported using the middle path, that is semi-authentic scripted samples – the sources being textbooks and self made materials.

In general, then, there is an apparent link between the degree to which teachers are prepared or able to access and/or use more authentic materials and the proficiency level of their learners. The more authentic material tended to be used at a higher proficiency level and the non authentic at a lower level.

2. Which teachers would like to?

The majority of teachers surveyed would like to use more authentic texts (N= 14), but for eight of these this was conditional on considerations of the texts' suitability for lower level learners and relevance to the course focus:

the resources that are just readily available often aren't what you want.

Of those who would not like to use them (N=3) the main concern was also suitability for lower levels.

In the data relating to this question, therefore, there is an overwhelming concern amongst teachers for the samples to be 'tailor-made' for the proficiency level and content of their courses

3. What difficulties do teachers see in teaching and developing materials based on the use of authentic texts?

Overall, again, the main concern was that materials are suited to the needs of the curriculum and learners, and the perception is that existing authentic materials may not meet these criteria.

The most frequently mentioned concern amongst questionnaire respondents (N= 16) was again a perception that fully authentic texts were "too difficult" or inaccessible in terms of complexity for lower levels:

Because people don't make sense when they speak, they speak gobble-de-gook, and my students can't follow that, it's too hard, they need it simplified

can we have it slowed down a bit,………………excessive use of colloquialisms and slang

Another difficulty (mentioned by six questionnaire respondents) is the lack of texts that focus on the particular content of the course and/or needs of learners. Four of these mentioned a lack of language features normally taught in the course, and/or too many features within texts that they do not want to focus on:

we want to have something on a special topic…………………………..yes, it's got to be very specific…

it's the unpredictability I suppose of authentic texts…………………………. you might want to focus on a certain feature, say for example, feedback in spoken language, oral feedback…………………. but there might be other little niceties that at low levels you are not going to cover…

The other thing is students may well get side-tracked by things that you don't really want them to focus on

and two mentioned lack of suitability in relation to more cultural or contextual concerns:

It may present, yes, it may present certain stereotypes, it may present certain cultural views which may not be accepting of other cultural views for example,……………. and also there can be very complex things here that rely, you know they build on a whole historical or more than historical, historical social context of New Zealand for example,

4. Which classes would benefit from instruction with this focus?

The teachers who were positive about using authentic texts to teach pragmatics were in general those teaching classes at pre-degree level – community or vocational – in a range of levels from elementary to intermediate. The exceptions were two who were teaching at degree level and two in a higher level pre degree course with an academic focus.

5. What kinds of texts need to be collected?

In this regard we asked teachers to identify both situations and pragmatic norms they were teaching or would like to teach. The kinds of situations, language and norms mentioned by respondents to the questionnaire were in general those that related to the curricula of the courses they were teaching, with learner needs also mentioned, but less often.

When asked about situations and genres, teachers reported a need for texts of casual conversation (N=9) and transactional exchanges (N=13). Five teachers mentioned texts of academic presentation and discussion and five mentioned texts of employment focussed situations. Not surprisingly these all relate to the curricula teachers were involved in teaching. Another need mentioned by five teachers was for texts with New Zealand speakers. This was more likely to have arisen out of a concern for learner needs than from curriculum considerations.

When asked about what norms they focused on currently in their instruction the teachers mentioned a fairly limited set of items. Teachers reported a need for texts illustrating norms of 'politeness' (N=

8) and conversation (N=8). They also reported a need for texts illustrating norms in transactional exchanges (N= 5). Again some of these relate to course content, others to perceived learner needs.

By far the main item teachers reported focusing on in instruction was speech acts. Most teachers appeared to focus on at least one of a set of speech acts that across the group included the following: giving invitations and opinions (including agreeing and disagreeing), making requests, appointments and introductions, greetings and thanking. The teachers also mentioned teaching responding to speech acts and demonstrating to learners the need to extend rather than give minimal responses to speech acts. It was apparent that the different teachers and classes focused on different speech acts, and no one speech act seemed to be more important than others across teachers and classes. Only making requests was mentioned by more than two teachers. The second main item teachers reported focusing on was 'politeness' with seven teachers mentioning this in the questionnaire and the term appearing as a major theme in around half the interviews. Politeness appeared to mean different things to different teachers and some of the words that the teachers used in association with the terms polite or politeness were acting appropriately, acceptable topics (to talk about), how 'you come across' and politeness strategies. Other aspects of pragmatics that one or two teachers reported focusing on were teaching softeners, turn taking, awareness of kinesics (body language and gesture) and intonation.

On the whole the range of pragmatic features that the teachers focused on was limited but this was, we suspect, in part due to the restricted terminology the teachers appeared to have at their disposal in the interview situation to identify and discuss pragmatic features of language. Similarly, although we tried to draw teachers into discussion of specifics in teaching pragmatics, we met with limited success. It is possible that this stems from the fact that practitioners have to be generalists and therefore do not necessarily have a very developed metalanguage for each and every aspect of language (for example grammar, lexis, phonology, pragmatics). However, it could also be due to fact that teachers did not have access to the interview questions in advance and had little time to plan their responses. The following excerpts illustrate the rather vague language some of these teachers used to refer to pragmatic features and forms:

'analysis means we listen (to a spoken dialogue) and the we go through it and *we do talk about things*'

'analyse the actual moves they made, you know who introduced this and how they disagree, which particular *words they use and that sort of thing*'

6. What activities can teachers suggest for use with authentic spoken texts?

The teachers supplied a good level of detail about the methodologies they used. A number of major themes were apparent. The questionnaire data showed the main methods were text analysis with accompanying 'noticing activities' (N=12), teacher modelling (orally or on the board) of sentences or text and controlled practice drilling (N=11) and role play (N=4). In addition to these widely used methodologies, an array of additional methods were reported including comparing the features in the L2 with the students first language and comparing features across registers, encouraging learners to try out the targeted feature outside class and report back, practising parts of texts/dialogues with teacher support or 'scaffolding', a 'deep end' strategy in which learners are required to produce the targeted features and then reviewing the learners' production and the use of writing to reinforce learning. Some but not all teachers started with a text as the point of departure for pragmatics instruction. One teacher spoke of trying to avoid using metalanguage in this kind of instruction.

In general (both questionnaire and interview responses) teachers reported an approach that can be characterized as planned, teacher-directed and output based. It was teacher-directed in the sense

that they construed pragmatics instruction largely in terms of information that they would transmit to the learners (for example, by modelling, provision of meta pragmatic explanations and teacher-led 'noticing activities' – noticing of features that had been pre selected by the teacher). It was output based in the sense that the teachers talked about '*getting them to do it*', to see the '*immediate effect*' as the impetus for instruction. Most teachers voiced a greater concern for the goal of student production than with the goal of fostering comprehension or awareness of pragmatic features in itself. Some excerpts from the interviews illustrate these characteristics:

I'd tell them straight and then we'd practise, we do role plays and that's basically all we do.

Hopefully it will sink in by repetition and modelling, that's the approach I use it often.

I'd point out and say what does this mean here

I want the students to practise it.

The same characteristics were also evident in 'problems' the teachers reported when using texts/transcripts in class:

students may well get side tracked by things you don't want them to focus on

you get all these kind of red herrings, people say things and you think I wish they hadn't said that, I don't want to explain that to the students.

By contrast to the kind of planned instruction that featured in most interview and questionnaires, one teacher (of a low proficiency class) reported focusing on pragmatics incidentally:

I don't focus on those things (politeness strategies), *they come up incidentally and I deal with them as they come up in the lesson…..So, if someone says, "teacher help," I will say "please teacher" and I'll model the polite sentence for them.*

7. Which teachers and classes would like to participate in this project?

The majority of those interested were teaching at pre-degree level either with a general (6), employment (1) or academic (3) focus. Only one teacher was teaching at a degree level and this was in interpreting and translation, a course in which pragmatics and spoken language is very important.

It is interesting that there appears to be less focus on and interest in spoken language at higher levels in spite of evidence cited in the literature that lack of knowledge of socio pragmatic aspects of communication (social and cultural norms associated with interaction) can constitute a barrier to successful communication in a second language even in people with higher levels of general proficiency in the language (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005) and that some form of explicit instruction is helpful (Kasper & Roever, 2004).

8. What level of involvement would the teachers like with the research and development aspect of this project?

The answer to this question comes from the interview data. Overall the responses were tentative, teachers being wary of committing themselves to the whole project for fear of over commitment:

Well, I'll do what I can given the time that I've got

It's all about tine commitment and wearing too many hats

Oh, not a big role because I don't have much time

but often it just depends on what the workload is at the time

Teachers tended to express interest in participating in only part of the forthcoming materials development and evaluation stages of the project - either the creation of recordings or in the production or adaptation/editing of teaching materials to use with the recordings. There were four expressions of positive interest in being involved in processes necessary for making or adapting the recordings and five in making new teaching materials to go with them or reviewing or adapting existing ones.

so I guess I'd be interested in thinking, about, yes in more narrowly defining the genres in working out exactly what we should be getting and then yes, going out and getting them I guess

Perhaps I'd actually be quite interested in the materials that are accompanying the tapes ……….being involved in that [writing them or reviewing what other people have written]

The most often mentioned (N=6) reasons for caution amongst those teachers interviewed was the time and energy commitment which may come with involvement.

I wouldn't be interested in the time and energy it was going to take

This was not surprising given the heavy workloads of teachers. One mentioned an unwillingness to do transcription. This could have been because of time or the routine nature of the task.

9. Identifying four suitable teachers to take part in a mentored materials creation and evaluation project

All the information for this process was gathered from the qualitative data, mainly in the interviews.

The criteria for selection included an elementary knowledge of pragmatics, interest in the topic and a wish to be involved in the project. The criteria also included experience and interest in research and materials development, a desire for professional development and a perception of the need for materials development in this area.

Four teachers were selected. One is teaching translation and interpreting at undergraduate level, one in English for Academic Studies in a pre-degree higher level certificate course, one in a pre-intermediate level general English class and on at a post beginner level in an employment and community focussed course.

Other findings related to the stated goals of the project

The extent to which these norms are already being taught.

The research showed that all teachers currently teaching spoken language (ie all but three respondents) mentioned teaching at least one type of socio-cultural norm, although the language used was often vague.

Raise the awareness, among teachers, of the need to include socio cultural norms in their courses and of the possibility of using authentic texts to facilitate this teaching

There is no direct evidence in our data to assess the degree to which awareness amongst teachers of this need was raised in this project. Intuitively it is likely that the activity of filling in the survey would have triggered some thinking on the part of teachers and the fact that the survey raised enough

interest to draw a response form 18 out of 24 teachers currently teaching spoken English meant that many of the staff were engaged in this activity if only briefly. However the research did show to what extent teachers as generalists lack specific metalanguage to talk about pragmatic norms and that this is a possible teacher development need.

Producing a report on existing teacher practices in the teaching of socio-cultural norms and attitudes towards using authentic spoken texts to facilitate this

This report includes a summary of current teacher practices. It will be used as the basis of a conference presentation in December and a journal article which we plan to jointly write.

Discussion

The rejection of the use of authentic texts for lower level classes to teach socio-cultural norms is understandable but there are documented ways round teachers' concerns. It is possible to get very short extracts from authentic samples to teach key pragmatic features such as key responses in adjacency pairs, backchannelling giving feedback in conversation (as reported by Englefield, 2008) other routine politeness formula (Tateyama, 2001), and key expressions used in speech acts such as polite requests and refusals. It is also possible to simplify authentic texts, re-script and re-record them, retaining the features that learners can readily notice and acquire. This approach has been used successfully in the Listening to Australia/ New Zealand series (Butterworth, 2000) and it might be possible to mentor and support teachers to do this. There are plans to do this with one of the teachers involved in the second stage of the project.

On the other hand the teaching of spoken English norms at higher levels seems to be largely lacking. There is an emphasis on the teaching of reading, listening and writing skills when oral skills and a knowledge of socio-cultural norms are equally important for more proficient speakers in employment and academic settings (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

There were two unexpected elements in the findings of this project. One was the seemingly limited metalanguage teachers had to identify pragmatic features and discuss them, although this might have been as a result of the research methodology – see findings 5. It is difficult for busy teachers to have an in depth knowledge of the theory of all the areas of language they teach and some professional development is needed for those who find they need it. The other unexpected finding was the emphasis on teacher led and output focussed activities.

An overwhelming theme was a lack of time for teachers to find or produce samples and materials which are suitable for the level and fit the curriculum of their courses. Clearly management support in the form of time to create effective materials might lead to better outcomes for learners.

The findings are not generalisable because of the limited sample. However they could be indicative of issues in similar contexts. A wider survey would yield more trustworthy results.

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. More suitable authentic and semi-authentic materials for pragmatics focussed instruction in the classroom, particularly in courses with a community focus, needs to be made available or produced. To this end there needs to be funding available for teachers who have the materials production skills and knowledge of the field to be released from teaching to produce good quality materials and evaluate them. Mentoring by more experienced teachers of those with less experience in this endeavour would build materials production and action research capability. In the next two planned stages of the project: material development (funded by AUT University) and evaluation (for which funding is being sought) we will trial such an approach.

2. Teachers need to be made more aware of the value and practicability of using authentic sample texts for the teaching of pragmatics at all levels, including very high and very low levels of proficiency. One way of doing this would be to run workshops in which teachers look at and reflect on samples of existing pragmatics focussed authentic materials with reference to classes in which they currently teach. Another way is to support (with time release) and mentor key teachers at several levels to produce such materials for their classes and report on the results of trialling them in classes. The advantages and disadvantages of each approach are discussed in Yates and Wigglesworth (2005). We will be seeking funding to complete the latter type of project in 2010.

3. There is an apparent need for teachers in the context researched to develop the metalanguage necessary to discuss and debate the teaching of pragmatics. This could be done through a series of recommended readings, particularly for those who wish to work with colleagues to develop their skills in this area of teaching.

4. There is a need for teacher development activities to raise the awareness of teachers in the context researched to the possibilities of using more learner initiated and awareness focussed activities. Teacher educators could be made more aware of this need and incorporate suitable activities in pre-service and in-service courses.

6. Teacher surveys such as the one that was undertaken in this research are a useful form of teacher development needs analysis. The survey in the current project revealed the development needs identified in findings 5 and 6 above.

7. Participants sometimes struggled to verbalise their thoughts on the topic of the questions. We realise that they needed time to reflect on the questions. We have learnt form this that it would be better in any future research project such as this to give participants the questions in advance.

8. A wider survey would produce more generalisable results.

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